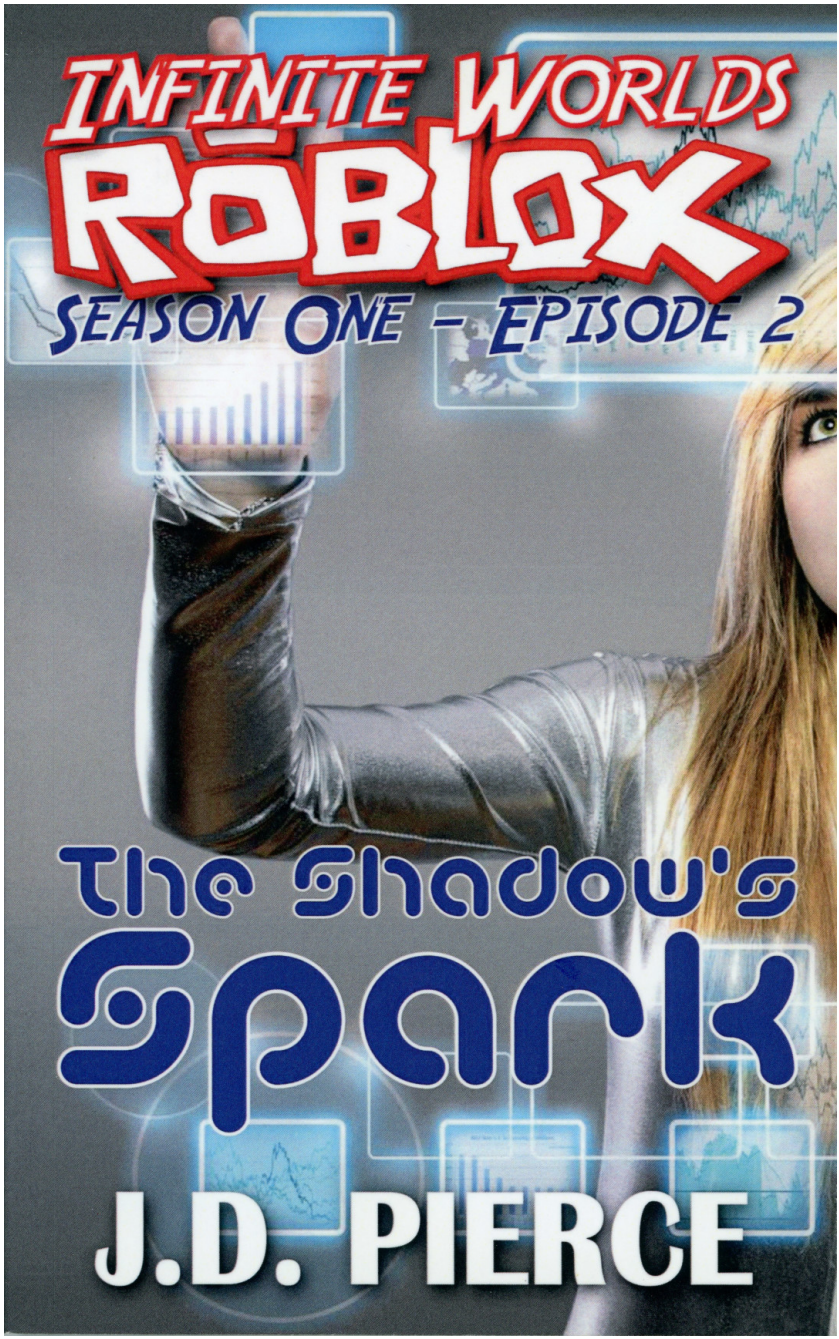
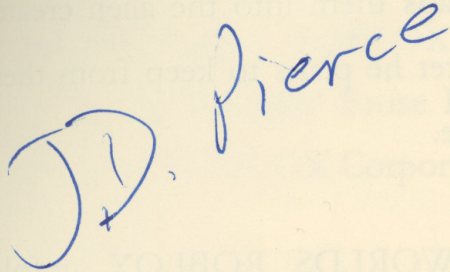

INFINITE WORLDS
ROBLOX
SEASON ONE - EPISODE 2
The Shadow's
Spark
J.D. PIERCE

The Shadow's Spark

Infinite Worlds ROBLOX

Season One – Episode 2

by J.D. Pierce



Summary

The battle to save Earth begins online.

Season One - Episode 2

After being told what they are up against, Max and Terri reluctantly agree to enter the world of ROBLOX. But Chester fails to reveal a secret as he straps them into the alien created machine. A secret he plans to keep from them until it is too late.

INFINITE WORLDS Roblox unfolds over six books of approximately 150 pages each (20,000 words) with the first five books ending in epic cliffhangers.

This book is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, establishments, organization, or locales are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity, and are used fictitiously. All other characters, and all incidents and dialogue, are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

ROBLOX and the ROBLOX logo are trademarks of ROBLOX Corporation.

INFINITE WORLDS is a trademark of Ramblin' Prose Publishing.

This book was manually transcribed to epub format by a fan. Any typos are likely the result of transcription error.

Please support the author of the Infinite Worlds Roblox series, Steve DeWinter: https://bit.ly/SteveDeWinter-AZ

Table of Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20

Chapter 1

Max sat in the small conference room and stared hard at the young kid seated on the other side of the table. He wasn't sure he had heard Chester correctly.

"Say that again."

Chester reached into the bag and extracted a couple of cheese puffs without taking his eyes off of Max. He leaned back and popped one of the puffs into his mouth.

"You heard me."

Max held his stare. "Yeah. I heard you, but I'm not sure I get what you just said."

Chester popped the other puff into his mouth and spoke while chewing. "Two warring alien groups have taken over all the nuclear missiles in the United States and they plan to use them unless we meet their demands."

Max's forehead wrinkled "Aliens?"

Chester popped another puff into his mouth with a flourish. "Yep."

Max turned to Terri. "Did you know about this?"

She shook her head. "Major General Braxton only told me someone had taken control of the missiles. Not who. Or what."

He faced Chester again. "Aliens? From outer space aliens?" He pointed to the sky. "Those aliens?"

Chester frowned. "Are there any other kind?"

"What do they look like?"

Chester shrugged. "We don't know. At least, I've never seen them."

“How do we know they’re aliens?”

“Oh, they’re aliens all right. Trust me.”

Max’s mind reeled without settling on any one thought. “Why are they threatening us? What do they want?”

Chester reached for the bag, thought better of it, rolled the top closed, and pushed the bag away from him. “So, you believe me?”

Max and Terri looked at each other. Was this kid joking with them? Terri was the first to respond. “Is it true?”

Chester nodded.

Terri nodded as well. “Then we have to believe you, but I have a question that you have to answer right now.”

Chester’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“Why us? I mean, why Max and me? Why did you drag us into this?”

Chester chuckled. “You involved yourselves.”

Max frowned. “What? How?”

Chester continued as if Max hadn’t asked his question.

“I made contact with the alien briefly, but he didn’t trust me and managed to escape from the computer I had, or thought I had, secured him in.”

Max bolted upright in his chair. “Escaped!”

Chester put his hands up. “Easy. It’s not like that. He’s not some slimy green alien that goes around abducting humans. He’s encoded into a digital signal and can’t live in the physical world.”

Terri frowned at him. “Then where is he?”

Chester looked at Max. “He’s taken up residence in ROBLOX.”

Max looked startled. “ROBLOX?”

Chester nodded. “And it seems his favorite place is a world called Level Arcadia.”

Max and Terri stared at each other, neither of them able to speak.

Chester reached for the cheese puffs, and then pulled his hand back. “He spends a lot of time living there. It looks like he even figured out how to modify the AI and make the inhabitants of your world behave more realistically.”

Terri finally found her voice. “I noticed that. But his code is incomplete. It’s fractured.”

“No. It isn’t,” Chester countered.

“I looked at the code myself. It wasn’t all there. It shouldn’t have been able to do anything.”

“It does plenty. The code you were looking at happened organically. It behaves more like a brain. Fractured yet connected. That code brings seemingly random elements together to make two plus two equal five. Programmers have been working for decades to replicate that kind of intelligence. They’ve created millions of lines of code in resource hogging systems, but none of that could deal with the trillions of influences that affect each individual decision. Our little friend did it with just a few lines of code.”

Max thought back to when the various emergency crews had shown up after the hover car crashed into a building in Arcadia. “I saw that. The NPCs seemed drawn to the destruction caused by a crash. A police avatar even asked me to stop by the police station to make a statement.”

Chester was nodding enthusiastically, “Thomas did all that with a few lines of shattered code.”

Terri stared at him. “Who’s Thomas?”

Chester took a sharp breath and let it out. “That’s the alien’s name.”

Max held his hands up. “Okay. If I had run into a real space alien online, don’t you think I would have noticed?”

Chester pointed at Max. “You saved his life. I think we can use that to foster trust between him and humans, that’s why you are here.”

Max frowned, the lines on his forehead deepening. “What? How? I don’t remember saving anyone’s life.”

“You most definitely saved him.”

“Well, give me a pat on the back, but I really don’t remember.”

Chester snapped his fingers. “That’s right. You know him as DigiCalvin.”

Max’s mouth hung open in shock. DigiCalvin was an alien? He thought back to the comments he had made when they first met. DigiCalvin had said he was not like Max. Is that what he meant? He was not actually human?

“But how did an alien get into ROBLOX in the first place?” Terri asked, replicating Max’s own thoughts.

Chester smiled and stabbed a finger in Terri’s direction. “Now you’re starting to ask the important questions. It is time to show you.”

Chester stood up quickly and rushed out of the conference room. When Max and Terri caught up with him, he was already sitting in the electric cart. He smiled at them and motioned for them to join him with a wave of his hand.

“Are you ready to have your minds blown?”

Chapter 2

Chester drove them back to where the SR-71 sat on the runway.

“Are we flying somewhere else?” Terri asked. Max looked at the damaged plane. He didn’t care how important it was to humanity, he wasn’t going back into one of those. Talk about having one of your wildest dreams come true, only for it to turn into a total nightmare.

Chester kept driving around the plane and continued down the side of the large hangar that was just a metallic skeleton. “Nope. We are going to the SETI Institute.”

“Why?” Terri asked.

Chester smiled. “I have an office there.”

Max shifted in his seat as Chester took another corner too sharply. “SETI. The search for extraterrestrial intelligence?”

“Yep,” Chester replied. “But we aren’t looking anymore. We found it.”

“When?” Terri asked.

“Ahh.” Chester intoned as he turned sharply around another corner. “More important questions. You know, Max, she seems to be beating you to the punch on all the important stuff.”

Max and Terri looked at each other. She smiled. “Don’t worry. He’s used to losing to me.”

Max was about to say something when Chester braked suddenly. Max and Terri grabbed for the handholds to keep from being thrown out of the cart.

“We’re here,” Chester said as he hopped from the cart and walked up to the small shed and placed his hand on the door. He turned back.

“Once you go through this door, it’s like being behind-the-scenes at Disneyland. You can never un-see what’s in here. The secrets to the magic will be revealed.”

Chester opened the door and stepped through the threshold. After a momentary pause of silence, his voice echoed out to Max and Terri from inside. “Are you coming?”

They looked at each other.

Terri shrugged. “I guess we don’t have much choice.”

Max let out an exasperated breath of air. “We always have a choice.”

She stood next to him and held her hand out to him. “I leave it up to you then, Max. We do this together, or not at all.”

He carefully took her hand in his. It was warm, soft, and sent electrical sparks shooting up his arm and sending his heart into overdrive. Whatever happened on the other side of that door, he was determined they would stay together.

They both took a deep breath and walked hand-in-hand through the doorway and into the unknown.

Chapter 3

Max didn't know what he expected to see once he was inside, but when his eyes adjusted to the bright light, he found himself seriously underwhelmed.

There was all manner of gardening equipment strewn about the small shed. He looked around for the secret exit door that would take them to the Promised Land. There was nothing. Except for the cleanly swept cement border along the four walls, the floor was dusty, unkempt, and made from old wooden planks that had started to split along the edges.

Max would have begun to doubt everything Chester had told them if it weren't for the fact that he had been rousted out of bed in the middle of the night by the military, flown all the way to the other side of the United States, and nearly shot down.

Chester was standing in the middle of the floor with one hand on the handle of a riding lawnmower that had seen better days. "If you could stand here next to me, we can get going. "

Terri let go of Max's hand and took a step toward Chester. "Go where?"

Chester indicated the floor next to him. "Just stand here. You don't want to get hit by any of the hanging stuff once we start moving. That happened to my handler once. He required twelve stitches and a tetanus shot," he said, smiling a little bit.

Terri moved next to Chester and looked at Max, using her eyes to tell him to hurry up.

Max took a couple of small steps and joined them in the middle of the room.

Chester smiled at them. "Ready?"

"Sure," Terri said for both of them.

Chester twisted the handle on the lawnmower and pressed the start button. The floor jerked downward an inch, Max and Terri nearly falling over right before the floor shot downward quickly.

Max's stomach had suffered enough from Casper's flying skills. He wasn't sure if he could keep suppressing the urge to vomit as they dropped in a controlled, but very fast, descent. The walls swept past them and seemed to grow taller from their perspective.

Max's stomach told him they were finally slowing down. His eyes confirmed that the walls were not moving as fast upward. The hole above them, which had started out as big as the platform they were on, was nothing more than a tiny speck of light.

The exposed elevator slowed down further and then came to an abrupt stop. Max bent his knees slightly to keep from being knocked over. Terri reached out and grabbed Max to steady herself.

They smiled awkwardly at each other and she let go of him. Chester pushed past them and opened the door that had appeared on one wall.

"We're almost there," he said excitedly. "Right this way."

Max bowed slightly and waved a hand in the direction of the door. "Ladies, first."

Terri punched him in the shoulder as she walked past.

Max rubbed his forming bruise as he followed her through the door. "What was that for?"

As soon as he was through the door, it hissed shut behind him. Max spun around and his eyes widened when he couldn't find a handle or knob to open the door with. He pointed at the empty panel and whispered to Terri, "Looks like we're trapped in here with the cheese puff boy."

"I heard that," Chester said.

"Sorry," Max apologized. "It's just that it seems too coincidental that your name is Chester, and you like Cheetos."

Chester stopped and studied Max for several seconds. “Chester’s not my real name. That’s as much as I can tell you.” He looked at Terri. “Looks like your boyfriend actually has a head on his shoulders.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Terri replied quickly.

Chester’s eyebrows raised. “Oh?”

Terri looked at Max and then back at Chester. “We’re just good friends. That’s all.”

Max felt like a knife had been plunged into his chest. Despite all the teasing from his friends, he had liked Terri ever since she left pre-school for Kindergarten a year ahead of him. But they grew up down the street from each other and she always treated him like a little brother.

He guessed there would be no finding out whether she felt the same way about him while they were out saving the world. At this rate, he thought to himself, she would be on her way to college and they would never see each other again. His eyes refocused and he saw Terri staring at him with a confused expression.

He looked at Chester quickly. “Right. We’re just friends. We’re not… She’s not… We’re not like that, exactly.”

Terri smacked him on the arm with the back of her hand. “That’s enough, Romeo. He gets the picture.”

Chester eyed them for a long moment before he turned around and headed down the hallway. Terri hit him again as she stomped off after Chester.

“What?” Max said, rubbing his arm. He was going to have a major bruise in a day or so if this kept up.

Ahead, the hallway stretched to the point of infinity. Max caught up. “Are we walking the whole way?”

Chester cast a sideways glance at him.

“Is there a problem with that?”

“No. No problem. How far is it?”

“The end of this tunnel is fifteen miles straight ahead.”

“Fifteen miles?” Max spat out.

“Don’t worry. We’re not going to the end. My office is just another hundred feet or so.”

Max fell back and walked silently behind Terri until Chester stopped at a door embedded in a recessed area of the wall.

“Ladies and gentlemen, and I use that term loosely,” Chester quipped. “May I present to you the front lines in the battle to protect Earth from an invading alien force?”

He extracted a brass key from his pocket and slid it into the deadbolt.

“You’re using a regular house key?”

“Yeah. So?” Chester said as he turned the key and pushed open the door.

“I would have expected a retina scanner, or a hand plate that verified your biometrics, or voiceprint verification, or something. But a regular old key?”

Chester pocketed the key. “An EMP can knock out all of those. But it won’t hurt a standard mechanical lock.”

“EMP?” Terri asked.

“Electromagnetic Pulse. Destroys electronics with a silent blast.” Max said quickly before Chester could respond.

Chester had a response ready anyway. “Coincidentally, I had a retinal scanner on here just last week. I had the locks switched out when the aliens took over the missile defense system. The powers that be plan to detonate a nuclear missile a hundred miles over the

U.S. to create an EMP blast that will wipe out every unhardened electronic system just to stop the aliens if we don't succeed."

"They can't do that," Max said.

"They can, and they will. They have given me," Chester checked his watch, "less than thirty hours to avert an intergalactic crisis. They will take drastic action to keep the aliens from wiping out all life on Earth with our own weapons if I fail my mission. That's why I changed my locks to the old pin tumbler variety. It may be my prison of choice, but it will not be my coffin."

Max was still digesting the prison comment when Chester flipped a switch with a sharp click. The room was immediately flooded with light that seemed to originate from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Max couldn't see where the light was coming from, but everything was evenly illuminated.

When Max's eyes adjusted to the brilliance he noticed a row of computers cobbled together with wires that all led to two harnesses mounted to the wall.

Chester walked over to the harnesses and placed his hand on one. "These are how you will save Thomas."

Max studied the harness assembly. It looked like an exoskeleton strapped to the wall with hydraulic cylinders that enabled movement of the person who wore it, or more accurately, was strapped into it.

Terri eyed the contraptions warily. "You don't expect us to get into those, do you?"

Chester smiled at her. "This is the only way you can operate at the same level as the two alien agents online."

Max moved closer. "So, this is like a virtual reality harness?"

"Technically, it's a sustenance and isometrics mechanism for your body. The operator, while strapped into this, is not using his," he looked at Terri, "or her, body to run the software. This connects directly to the brain and extracts your essence; your spark, if you

will. This machine's purpose is to keep the body nourished and healthy for extended periods of use."

Max held up his hands. "Wait a minute. You said extract…"

"Your spark, yes."

Terri broke into the conversation. "What are you talking about? What spark?"

Chester took a deep breath and let it out slowly before he answered. "Your spark is that quintessential thing that makes you, you."

The look on Terri's face reflected her confusion. "What makes me, me?"

Chester continued. "Despite science being able to explain how everything about the human body, including how the brain works, we still have no explanation for how the mind works. Twins raised in the same environment, and with the same genomic structure, turn out to be two very different people with unique personalities. Science offers nothing to account for that difference. And it's that difference that makes all of us unique from everyone else who has ever lived."

Max stared at Chester like he had turned into a bug-eyed green alien himself. "You're talking about a soul?"

Chester shook his head. "I'm a scientist. I have an IQ of over 180. Despite my chronological age, I am not taken to childish flights of fantasy, but yes, I'm talking about your soul."

Chapter 4

Max turned around and reached for the door handle. He pulled, but it wouldn't open.

Chester clucked his tongue at him like an adult chastising a small child.

Max spun around and glared at Chester. "Let us out of here."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Max." Chester replied icily in a steady monotone.

Max turned to Terri. "I don't know how he managed to convince the military or the President that he was smart, but what he's talking about is nonsense."

Chester took a step closer. "I won't deny that it has some resemblance to pseudoscience, but I assure you, it is very real."

"But you can't prove it."

"I didn't say that."

Terri looked back and forth between the two boys as they continued to argue.

Max pointed at Chester. "You just said that you were going to extract our souls using these machines. I don't believe that's possible."

"And that's not exactly what I said. I called it your spark."

"I don't care what you call it; I'm not going to let someone like you put me in that thing. I don't care how many people you got to believe that aliens have taken over the world. I'm not going to let you kill me and then say 'oops I made a mistake.' No way! Nuh uh. Not gonna happen."

"The Extractor's not going to kill you."

Max's arms shot in the air. "Oh, great! The thing's called "The Extractor." He stabbed a finger at Chester. "You keep away from me!"

Chester looked to Terri. "Can you talk some sense into him?"

Terri stared at Chester. "I have to admit, he's making sense. I don't think I want to be strapped into that thing either."

Chester's shoulders dropped. "You too?" He held his hands up. "Okay, I obviously explained it wrong. You have both completely misunderstood everything."

Max was still trying to get the door open. He gave up and stomped over to Chester and stuck his hand out, palm side up. "The key."

Chester looked up at him with owl eyes. "Give me one more chance to explain this better. Then, if you still want to leave, I won't stop you."

Max glared at him. "Go ahead."

Chester pointed at the exoskeletons attached to the wall. "These move your consciousness fully into the digital spectrum so that you interact with the virtual world as if you were really there. I've tried it myself, and I have to tell you, it's pretty cool. And look. I'm not a zombie. My mind moved back just as easily and I woke up like I had only been asleep. It's perfectly safe."

Max looked at Terri. She indicated that she wanted to leave with a nod toward the door. Max poked the tips of his fingers into Chester's chest and stared unblinking into his pudgy face. "Key."

Chester's breathing quickened and he looked panicked between Max and Terri.

Max leaned in closer and hooked a thumb in Terri's direction. "Did you hear what she did to the two government agents who tried to kidnap us?"

Chester glared at him. "You wouldn't dare."

Terri glared back. “One more word out of you and you’ll find out.”

Chester’s mouth opened and closed repeatedly in silence. His hand shook as he removed the key from his pocket and held it out.

Max snatched it from his trembling fingers and ran to the door. He unlocked it and pulled the door open. A large man in a dark blue suit and thin light blue tie filled the entire door frame, blocking Max’s exit.

“Let me introduce you to my personal bodyguard,” Chester said, all fear absent from his voice. “Max and Terri, this is Emerson. Emerson, they are trying to escape.”

Emerson reached in and grabbed Max by the throat, lifting him off the ground. Max clawed at Emerson’s hand, but he ignored him as he used his other arm to fend off Terri’s sudden flurry of kicks.

Emerson threw Max at Terri, both of them landing in a heap on the ground. Terri pushed Max off her and sprang back to her feet; and stopped cold when Emerson pointed a gun at her.

Chester stepped over Max and picked up the key that had clattered to the ground when Emerson had lifted Max.

Max looked up at him, disgust filling his eyes. “You promised to let us go.”

Chester stood upright and turned to Emerson. “You can put that away.” He faced Max again. “No. I said I wouldn’t try to stop you. I didn’t say anything about Emerson.”

Terri glared at him. “You knew he was out there, didn’t you?”

Chester smiled. “Did you like my little act?”

He mimicked cringing and shaking his hands the same way he had when Max was demanding the key from him. “Please don’t hurt me, Karate Kid.”

His smile faded and was replaced by a serious expression. “You

two are as much prisoners here as I am."

Terri gave him a surprised look. "You're a prisoner? I thought you were in charge."

Chester laughed. "It's all rather confusing, I know. In this facility, I get to order everyone around like I own the place. But the one order I can't give is to let me go."

Chester dusted imaginary dirt off his pants.

"We are in this together to the bitter end."

Max stood up, casting a wary glance in Emerson's direction. "What do you mean the bitter end?"

Chester glanced at his watch and gave Max a sorrowful look. "The three of us either save the world in the next twenty-nine hours, or we die trying."

Chapter 5

Max tugged at the back of the silver bodysuit that rode up his backside uncomfortably. He stared at himself in the mirror. Less than two hours before, he had been sitting in bed wondering about how DigiCalvin was different

Now he had his answer. DigiCalvin was actually an alien named Thomas.

Thomas?

It seemed a strange name for an alien. Shouldn't it have been something more like SPLORG? Or something unpronounceable by human vocal chords?

And how did he get into ROBLOX?

Forget that! How did an alien get on Earth in the first place without anyone noticing? You'd think that if an alien actually landed somewhere on the planet, that would be a hard secret to keep.

Chester had promised to answer everything while he prepped them for the extractors. Max still hated that name. Was it really going to extract who he was from his body? Could it rip his essence from his mortal body and encode him as a computer program?

Max laughed out loud in the empty room. He was about to become Max 2.0, the hottest app on iTunes.

What would happen to him when he was no longer inside his body? Chester had said that he had done it to himself and returned safely.

Max looked at his reflection.

"Why us?"

There was a faint knock at the door.

“Yes?” Max yelled out.

Terri’s muffled voice came through the door. “Are you decent?”

Max tugged at the back of his silver bodysuit. “If you could call this decent?” he replied.

She opened the door and stepped in, wearing a similar silver bodysuit. She smiled before laughing out loud. “You look as ridiculous in this as I do. I feel like we are in an old episode of Lost in Space.”

Max tilted his head. “You’ve seen that show too?”

She nodded. “My dad got all the seasons on DVD.”

“Yeah. Mine too. Scary how these look just like those suits.” He looked her up and down. “Actually, you make this look pretty good.”

She blushed and her fists balled up at her side. “Don’t make me pummel you again.”

Max covered his shoulders defensively with his hands. “I wouldn’t think of it. Do you really think these are necessary? Or do you think Chester’s trying to make us look silly?”

Terri rolled her shoulders uncomfortably. “I noticed some contact points in the inside of the suit. I think they are conductive.”

Chester stepped into the room. “They’re both functional and stylish.”

Terri spun around and Chester stopped short, unsure if she was about to strike out. He took a step backward and hooked a thumb toward the door. “Emerson is in the hallway.”

Terri visibly relaxed her posture. “I’m not going to do anything. We’ve already agreed to do this. You just surprised me, is all.”

Chester kept his distance. “The contacts you noticed in your suit are there so we can stimulate your muscles to keep them from

atrophying while you are in the extractor."

"Stimulate our muscles?" Terri asked.

"Little electric shocks. Nothing too strong, just enough to keep the muscles moving."

Max ran a hand along the suit material of his arm, his fingers locating one of the contact points. "Will we feel these shocks?"

"Not once you are uploaded. What happens to your body in the real world will not technically be happening to you. You will be experiencing the digital world instead."

Terri straightened up. "I still don't get how this works."

Chester nodded. "I'll explain it to you while we get you loaded in. We don't have much time, so we need to multitask."

Chester turned and paused at the door. "Trust me, this is perfectly safe."

Max and Terri glanced at each other. They didn't have any other choice, so they followed Chester into the hallway and down to his office.

Max glanced behind to see Emerson hanging back should they try to run or fight back. Several technicians were waiting next to the harnesses and they worked quickly to strap Max and Terri into them.

Max let them pull and tug as they worked him into the harness. He looked at Chester.

"Tell me one more time what Terri and I are supposed to do."

Chester took a deep breath. "You go into your world and convince him to return to the computer where I first woke him up."

Max frowned. "First woke up? I thought you said he was from outer space?"

Chester smiled. “He came to us encoded in a signal from deep space. We picked up the signal and kept his program in storage since 1977.”

“You’ve had him since 1977? What have you done with him all this time?” Terri asked.

Chester shot her a look. “If you stop interrupting, I will tell you.”

“Sorry,” she said sheepishly and glanced at Max and rolled her eyes while Chester continued.

“It wasn’t until the early 2000s that NASA scientists were able to access his program and run it. And when they did, they were shocked that it was a living being trapped inside the code. He called himself Thomas and gave them the technology that made it possible to take someone’s mind and insert it into a computer program.”

“The extractors?” Max asked.

Chester looked at him. “Yes . The extractors. He said he was taught how to build them from an early age by his parents. He didn’t know what it was they were teaching him, but they kept testing him until he was able to build a working one from scratch.”

“Why?” Terri asked.

Chester shrugged. “He guessed it was so that he could be returned to his body.”

Max glanced at Terri and said the question that was on both their minds. “But his body isn’t here.”

Chester nodded. “I tried to explain that to him, and it was after he finally understood me that he made his escape. We were working on a way to get him back when two separate alien programs infiltrated the internet and made contact, both demanding the return of Thomas.”

“How do we get him out?”

“I will provide you with a digital case that you can use to

download him out of the internet. But you have to get him to place his hand on the panel for it to work."

"What if he refuses?"

Chester leaned in. "Convince him."

Terri spoke up. "You said that if we didn't get Thomas out, the aliens are threatening to launch the missiles, destroying everything."

"Yes," Chester replied.

"Don't you think they're bluffing? Won't they be destroying Thomas as well?"

Chester shut his eyes for a long moment before opening them again. "We can't begin to understand the rationale of an alien mind. We can't take that risk, so if you don't get Thomas out before the clock runs out, there will be a nuke detonated high above the Earth, frying every electronic system in America. It will stop the aliens from launching the missiles, but it will also throw the U.S. back into the pre-industrial era. We will be at the mercy of every nation the planet until we can rebuild."

Max shook his head. "So, the military is adopting a first strike policy? Wipe out the U.S. before the aliens can?"

Chester tugged at the frame of Max's exoskeleton. "The EMP will only destroy electronics. We will all still be alive. If the aliens are given the chance to launch their missiles, all life on Earth will end. Just convince Thomas to come out before any of that happens and everything will be fine."

"You make it sound so easy," Max remarked, but he didn't think it was going to be easy at all; and he knew he was right.

The technicians attached conductive leads to his temples and then secured the helmet on Max's head, blocking out his vision.

"Ouch," yelped Terri.

“What happened?” Max said.

“Something stabbed me in the arm,” she replied.

Just then, something stabbed Max in the arm.

“Ugh,” he grunted from the sharp pain. “Chester, what’s going on?”

Chester’s voice echoed at them through the helmets. “Those are just the needles for the IV drip to keep your body nourished while you are inside.”

Max tried to move, but the exoskeleton harness held him firmly in place. “You didn’t say anything about needles.”

“We don’t have time for you to come out to eat or sleep, so the harness will tend to your physical needs for the duration.”

“Are there any other surprises for us?” Max asked, his heart racing at what Chester might say.

“Only that the transfer process is a little disorienting.”

“What transfer…?” Max didn’t have time to finish his sentence when Terri let out a blood curdling scream.

Chapter 6

“Terri,” Max yelled; and then the whole world fell away from him. He couldn’t keep from screaming as he fell. He could hear Terri still screaming, and then she suddenly stopped, leaving him the only one screaming.

What had they done to her? He thought as he kept falling through total darkness.

And then he stopped screaming. Well, he didn’t stop screaming, he just couldn’t hear anything. It was absolutely silent. Not just the simple silence of a quiet room, but the total absence of sound.

The falling sensation had stopped at the exact same moment he couldn’t hear himself anymore.

Was he dead?

Had the extractor harnesses killed them both?

He couldn’t feel his body anymore. He tried to think about his tongue. Anytime he thought about his tongue, it felt as if it suddenly swelled to twice its original size and he noticed every sensation of moving it around inside his mouth.

But this time, Max couldn’t feel his tongue. He tried to focus all his thoughts on it in the pitch black darkness.

He couldn’t feel anything.

His tongue wasn’t there.

He tried to call out to Terri, but he had no voice.

The darkness was suddenly chased away by a blinding white light that enveloped him. Max tried to close his eyes against the brilliant light, but he had no eyelids. He tried to raise his arm to shield his eyes, but he had no arm.

He tried to look around, but there was no form to the white space

around him. He didn't know if he was frozen in place, or if he was actually looking around, and he couldn't tell the difference between one point in space from another.

It felt like he had been locked in this blank space for all of eternity when he thought he heard something. He strained to listen, despite not having any ears.

The sound echoed again, closer this time.

He tried to turn around and zero in on the sound, but he still couldn't tell if he was moving or not.

Whatever he was hearing sounded modulated, like someone speaking through one of those voice changing toy megaphones. "Max?" the voice said, clearer this time.

"Terri!" Max replied, and heard his own strangely undulating voice for the first time in what felt like forever.

"Max?" the voice said again, this time sounding more like Terri.

"I'm right here, Terri,"

"Where are you? I can't see anything. It's white everywhere."

This time, he could hear Terri speaking from one side. "Keep talking," he said.

"What about?" Terri said, and he felt her sound shift to be in front of him as he tried to focus on it.

"It doesn't matter, just keep talking."

"I can't think of anything."

"Tell me about how silly you look in that silver jumpsuit."

As soon as he thought that, Terri appeared in front of him, facing away from him. "You look even sillier," she replied.

"Turn around, Terri," Max said. "I'm behind you."

Terri turned around and looked at Max before looking around her. “Where are you?”

“I’m right in front of you.”

She looked at him, and then away again. “I can hear you, but I can’t see you.”

Max had a sudden realization and thought about how he looked in his own bodysuit.

Terri looked right at him and smiled excitedly. “How did you do that?”

“I don’t know, but you appeared after I mentioned your suit. You must have thought about it and then appeared.”

She looked at him. “Okay, so I guess we’re not dead.”

Max looked around at the limitless white space they stood in. “I guess not, but where are we?”

She looked down and moved her arms around. “This is so itchy. My jeans skirt was much more comfortable.”

Max’s mouth fell open when the lower half of Terri’s clothes shimmered and then changed instantly into her jeans skirt.

He pointed at her. “Terri, look,”

She looked down at herself. ” What the…”

Max looked down and thought about the one time when he went skiing and kept getting snow down the back of his pants every time he fell over on his snow board. His silver bodysuit shimmered and was replaced with the bright red parka and black ski pants that were one size too small for him.

He looked up at Terri, to see her clothes shifting rapidly from one outfit to another. She finally settled on jeans, tennis shoes, and a thick wool sweater before looking at him. “Do you realize how long I could sleep in every morning if I could do this in real life?”

They could change their appearance just by thinking about it. Max placed his fists on his hips. “Check this out, Terri.”

He was wearing a Superman outfit, complete with red cape flapping in the wind.

A large voice echoed from all around them. “You guys seem to be adjusting pretty quickly,” Chester said. Max’s clothes shifted back to what he normally wore.

“Chester?” Terri called out. “Where are you?”

“I’m speaking to you through a microphone attached to my computer. I’m happy to report that the transfer was a success and your bodies are doing just fine.”

“Is there a reason why they wouldn’t?” Max asked.

Chester cleared his throat. “You’ve no doubt figured out how to see and hear. Have you been able to alter your appearance yet?”

“Yeah,” Terri responded. “We can change our clothes just by thinking about it.”

Chester’s bellowing laugh echoed loudly all around them. “You can do so much more than that. The doorway program is not limited to real-world constraints.”

“Where are we?” Terri asked.

“You are inside a program on my computer,” Chester replied.

“So, we are interfacing with the software through all those connectors on our bodies?” Max asked.

“No,” Chester said. “I have transferred your mind, your consciousness, directly into the computer. Your bodies out here are not connected to you anymore. You are both completely digital.”

Chapter 7

“Digital?” Max said. Chester took a quick breath. “It’s the same technology Thomas used to travel to Earth.”

Max looked at Terri and then back up. “So you can get us back to our bodies?”

“Of… course. When you guys find Thomas and convince him to come out, I will put you right back in your bodies. Except for your new memories, it will be like you never left.”

“Promise?” Terri yelled to the sky.

“You have my word,” Chester replied.

“Now, hold on, this is going to feel a little weird.”

“Wait!” Max yelled, but it was too late.

His stomach lurched and in the distance, he saw a square door rushing toward them. He reflexively held his arms up as the door abruptly stopped right in front of him.

Chester’s voice boomed from everywhere at once. “Go ahead. Open the door.”

“Why,” Terri asked to the sky. “What’s behind it?”

“Your training grounds,” Chester replied.

Max gripped the doorknob and twisted it. Rather than the door opening, the world around him shifted at high speed and filled in with color and definition. He couldn’t shake the wave of nausea that overcame him and he let go of the handle.

The world stopped instantly and he closed his eyes to fight off the dizziness.

When he opened them again, his jaw hit the floor.

They were back on their street.

They were home.

Chapter 8

Chester's voice boomed over the street. "I have replicated the physics of Level Arcadia, but to make you more comfortable, I have rebuilt your street."

"Why?" Terri asked before Max found his voice.

"I need to teach you how to access the software panel, and some other things, before you go into Arcadia. I don't know how long you will have before the agents come after you…"

Max put his hands up. "Whoa, whoa, whoa! You didn't say anything about the agents coming after us."

"Didn't I?"

Max and Terri exchanged a look. Chester was playing with them. He had to be.

"No," Max said. "I'm pretty sure I would remember you saying something like that."

"Sorry. We were rushed for time and I had to get you into the system to give you time to adjust."

Terri spoke up. "Okay, while we are adjusting, why don't you tell us everything?"

"The players you know as AgentSmith and AgentJones are artificial intelligences sent by aliens."

"How did they get here? Did you guys record another signal?"

"We don't know where they came from. They both showed up around the same time and each made the same demands for us to hand Thomas over to them."

Terri looked at Max, but she was clearly talking to Chester as she spoke loudly. "You said these were artificial programs."

Max looked at Terri. “Artificial? He sounded like a real player to me?”

“I know,” Chester replied. “They are highly sophisticated and they are learning; quickly. That’s why we have to act now.”

“What do they want?” Terri asked.

“They are both here for Thomas, but only one of them is trying to kill him. The problem is, we don’t know which one is friendly and which one is the enemy.”

Max frowned. Feeling was returning to his face and he could sense the lines deepen in his forehead. “How about you figure out which one took control of the missile defense system? There’s the bad guy right there.”

“Unfortunately, they both fought for control of the systems at the same time. It all happened so fast, by the time the dust had settled; they each controlled half of the system. And they both said they plan to use it.”

Terri was still looking at Max, but spoke to Chester. “Suppose we convince Thomas to come with us. Who are we going to turn him over to?”

“That’s not for us to decide” Chester

“Do you even hear yourself, Chester? shouted. “We have to figure out who is who before we turn over Thomas to anyone. If we make the wrong choice, everyone could be dead in two days.”

“Don’t you think I know that? And we still have to figure out how to stop one side from launching their missiles once we turn over Thomas to the other.”

Chester’s voice came from behind him, and was no longer booming across the sky. Max spun around and faced Chester standing in the middle of the street frowning at him.

Max pointed at him. “Hey. How did you get here? Is there another extractor?”

Chester shook his head. ‘No. I’m logged in with an avatar while sitting at my computer.”

“If you could do that, why didn’t you have us do that rather than rip us from our bodies?”

“I needed you in here working at the same speed as the alien agents. Any delay in responding to what’s going on around you could keep us from achieving our mission.”

Terri stepped closer. “And part of that mission is to turn him over to the good guys. Why aren’t you trying to figure out who that is?”

Chester briefly closed his eyes for a second before opening them again. “I’ve tried.”

“Then try harder,” Max said forcefully. “Everything, and I do mean everything, depends on us making the right decision here.”

Chester looked down the street for a long moment without saying anything.

Max and Terri exchanged a look and then Max stepped up to Chester and placed a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll get Thomas. You just figure out who we give him to.”

Chester stared into his eyes. It was all so real, Max felt like he was having an out of body experience. Max removed his hand and chuckled to himself.

“What’s so funny?” Chester frowned. It was amazing how lifelike and expressive the digital representation of Chester behaved.

“I was just thinking that I must be out of my head right now, and I am, literally out of my head, on more than one level.”

Terri nodded. “Everything about this is crazy. But if it keeps the world from getting blown up, I’ll take crazy any day.”

Chester took a deep breath. “I’ve been tracking the two agent programs that have been chasing Thomas. They are getting smarter and learning how to use the environment you created to help them.

It’s going to take all your skills and ingenuity to get to Thomas before they do.”

Terri’s face grew serious. “Then let’s get going.”

Chester took a step back. “Not yet. You have to be trained.”

“Trained for what?” Max asked.

He didn’t like the look Chester gave him in response.

Chapter 9

Chester looked at both of them. “You have to learn how to use your interface and you have to unlearn your physical limitations.”

“Unlearn our physical limitations?” Tem asked.

Chester nodded. “I’ve modified the code for your avatars in this program. You are stronger, faster, and generally better at everything, you just don’t know it.”

“What about Arcadia? We won’t be stronger or faster in there.” Max said.

“I’ve loaded the hack into Terri’s interface. Once you are inside your ROBLOX world, she can modify the player code and give you the edge you need. But you will have to work fast. Once the agents discover what you can do, they will rewrite their own code and mimic your abilities. We have a short window to get Thomas before that happens.”

“And the clock is already ticking,” Terri added. “Show us what we need to learn.”

Chester nodded. “Right. Swipe down through the air with your right hand. That will activate your interface.”

Terri swiped her hand down through the air and started looking around her. Max couldn’t see anything, but Terri kept glancing around her quickly, poking at nothing in the air in front of her.

She smiled. “This is cool.”

Max sliced his hand downward and the space in front of him shimmered to life, showing multiple screens of information floating all around him. He reached forward and touched a screen. It instantly brightened with the other screens fading slightly, letting him focus on the one screen.

He swiped his hand sideways through the air, and the screens

scrolled by like they were on a 3D carousel. He put his hand up and the screens stopped.

He looked over at Terri. She stuck both hands out and pinched the empty air in front of her. She then widened the distance between her hands and smiled.

Max did the same on the screen in front of him. He reached forward and grabbed two corners of the floating display and pulled. The screen expanded in front of him and he was able to see all the icons in greater detail.

He recognized this screen.

It was the ROBLOX Studio.

Chester smiled. “You can work in the studio to build anything and load it in real-time into the world. I figured out you should be able to get to Thomas before the agents if you could alter the world as needed.”

Max looked at Terri. Her fingers were typing furiously in the air in front of her. She paused and looked at him, excitement in her voice.

“I can write code and upload it into anything you build. Go ahead, build something.”

Max looked at the studio screen in front of him. “What do I build?”

“Just build a car,” she said. “I’ll code the operation of it.”

Max started tapping at the icons for shapes. He found it easy to build with both hands. Much better than using a mouse. It felt more natural building in 3D in the air in front of him. He got the hang of it quickly and soon had a basic car ready to load.

Terri typed furiously in the air in front of her and finally looked at him. “Ready?”

“Yep,” Max replied and he loaded the car.

A car, looking very realistic, appeared on the street in front of them. Terri looked like she held something in her hands and placed it against the side of the car.

The car suddenly started up. Terri jumped over the side and landed in the front passenger seat, strapped on her seatbelt, and motioned for Max to join her. “Care to take it for a spin?”

Max looked at Chester. “That’s not what I built. It looks too realistic.”

“Your memories are being used to create the visual representation of the car. Your program brain has been told to see a car. Your memories have been mined to specify the exact car you are seeing.”

Max looked at Terri. “Is she seeing the same car I am?”

Chester shook his head. “Probably not. Her memories are different. The program tells your brain that you are seeing a car, so you are both looking at a car. But the image is based on your specific experiences, so you are not seeing the exact same car.”

Max looked at the sporty pearl white Porsche 911 Turbo with the top down. “What are you looking at Terri?”

“A shiny red Ford Mustang convertible,” she replied. “Let’s see what she can do.”

Max looked at Chester. “How does the car handle?” he asked, “I didn’t make any pedals or a steering wheel. I can’t control it.”

“Yes you can,” Chester replied. “The interface uses your brain’s memories to finish the object. Just use the steering wheel and the pedal on the floor like you would in the real world. Remember, all of this is a representation of a world; it’s not restricted by physics. Anything you imagine will be made real for you by the interface.”

“So all I have to do is think about how to drive, and I can drive the car?”

Chester smiled. “There’s only one way to find out.”

Max jumped into the driver's seat. The engine roared louder as he pressed the accelerator. He looked at Terri as he clicked his seatbelt into place. "Hang on," he said and stomped on the gas pedal with all his might.

The tires laid down rubber on the road and the car shot down the street leaving a trail of blue smoke in its wake.

"Wait!" Chester called after them, but Max ignored him and gunned the engine as they skidded around the corner.

Terri squealed with delight as Max skidded sideways around the next corner and then straightened out before shifting into sixth gear and rocketing down the short street.

Max circled the block and then took the corner tightly, jumping the curb and nearly losing control. He regained it quickly and twisted the wheel, skidding around the next corner.

It was proving to be difficult to convince his parents to sign him up for driver training school, so he was probably a couple years away from doing this in a car again, so he was going to cherish every second of this ultrarealistic simulation.

"Let's see how fast this beast can go," Max said to no one in particular and smashed the pedal to the floor.

"Stop!" hollered Chester in his ear.

Max reacted from the unexpected appearance of Chester in the back seat and whipped the steering wheel sharply in one direction, sending the car into an uncontrolled skid.

Chester disappeared right before the front tire hit the edge of the curb and the car flipped sideways, going airborne; Terri and Max both screaming in sheer panic.

The car slammed onto the road and tumbled violently as it continued down the street without slowing down with Terri and Max trapped inside.

Chapter 10

Pieces of glass and metal flew off the car as it rolled wildly down the road. It felt like they were riding in the spin cycle of a washing machine.

With the world cycling quickly from sky to ground and back to sky, Max saw the edge of the map that Chester had created getting closer.

In the game, when you fell off the edge of the world map, you would fall into the abyss and then be reborn at the spawn point. Would Chester's simulated neighborhood have the same rules as the standard ROBLOX game?

A chilling thought occurred to Max as they continued to bounce closer to the edge of the world. He and Terri weren't playing this game with the benefit of a keyboard or mouse. They were actually programs themselves downloaded into the game. If they died in the game, would they stay dead?

The car rolled slower as they reached the edge of the map. It finally settled on its roof with half the car teetering precariously over the edge.

Max and Terri hung upside down from their seatbelts. Chester stood outside the upside down car and was shaking his head.

Max reached to unhook his seatbelt, shifting the balance of the car. With a moaning creak, the car tilted further over the edge of the map.

"Stop moving!" yelled Chester and he disappeared suddenly.

Max and Terri hung there, neither moving nor even breathing heavily.

"What do you think will happen if we fall?" Terri asked.

Max looked into the abyss of forever and then back at Terri, the

slight movement rocking the car back and forth. He held his breath as the car settled into a new equilibrium.

“You don’t think that if we die, we stay dead, do you?” Terri asked quietly.

Max didn’t have an answer but his stomach shuddered as the car started moving again.

“Do you feel that? We’re going over the edge!” Terri said, panic rising in her voice.

Max did feel it, and there was nothing he could do. He tried to angle himself to the side closest to the ground. It wasn’t easy to move around in the uncomfortable grip of the seatbelt, and all he ended up doing was place that proverbial straw on the camel’s back.

The car let out a final moan of metal scraping against metal before it tilted suddenly toward the abyss and fell off the edge of the world.

Max could barely hear Terri’s screams over his own as they fell… and fell… and fell. The car spun slowly as they dropped into the abyss. Outside the car, he could see the small section of world that Chester had built getting smaller and smaller each time it rolled into view.

And then Max felt every cell of his body ignite into white-hot infernos as he dissolved into nothing. Before he could no longer put a single thought together, his mind thought about Terri.

Because of him, she was about to die; removed from her body and destroyed in the digital realm.

He never even had the chance to tell her how he really felt.

Max hadn’t expected to feel so much pain in the digital world.

The world went white as he felt himself coalesce to nothingness.

And then the world formed around him again. Not just any

world, but the street where he grew up.

A half second later, Terri appeared right next to him. They looked at each other right before her eyes rolled up into her head and she collapsed to the ground.

Max reached forward to grab her when every muscle in his body convulsed and he pitched forward to his hands and knees, coughing violently.

He looked at Terri lying perfectly still on the ground, and then fell to one side, sprawling out unceremoniously on the ground; his eyes closing slowly and the world fading to darkness.

Chapter 11

Max's eyes popped open and he shot up in bed. He looked around at his room, confusion wrinkling his forehead.

Had he been dreaming?

He looked toward the window that was open a crack, letting in the cool night air.

He looked around his room and laughed out loud nervously in the darkness. That had to have been the most vivid dream he had ever had in his life.

He looked at his hands and then felt the soft cotton of his T-shirt and sweatpants. His bed was warm and soft. He glanced around at his room. Everything was in its place.

He stepped out of bed and felt the cool carpet tickle the ends of his toes as he stared out the window. The street was dark and quiet; most of the light from the single streetlamp was blocked by the trees that still clung to the last of their turning leaves.

He listened.

The same familiar noises came to him in the stillness. The sounds of the old house settling. The wind rustling the dried leaves across the sidewalk outside.

Everything was as it should be.

But why couldn't he shake the feeling that everything was abnormal?

He had never felt so disoriented in his life. Well, once when he had spent the night at Noah's house, they had dared each other to stay up all night and they finally both passed out in the early morning. When he woke up later that afternoon, he thought it was the next day and it took a while to re-orient his body's clock.

But this was different.

He was having a hard time focusing on a single thought before his mind wandered.

He let out a big breath and headed for the bathroom to splash cold water on his face and shake off the lasting effects of the nightmare.

He was finally able to hold onto a single thought for more than a few seconds and decided it was time to come clean with Terri. Even though it had been a dream, he had hidden his feelings for far too long. Maybe that was what his subconscious was telling him.

It was time to stop dreaming and live his life.

He splashed cool water on his face and stared at himself in the mirror. “I just have to tell Terri,” he said out loud.

“Tell me what?” a familiar voice said behind him.

He jumped and spun around.

Terri stood at the open doorway and looked quizzically at him. Her expression suddenly changed to confusion and she held up her hand to block her vision. “Ahh! What are you doing? Put on some clothes!”

He looked down and his heart skipped a beat as he realized he wasn’t wearing his sweatpants and T-shirt anymore, but was standing there in his boxers; and nothing else.

He hunched over and tried to cover himself with his hands. “What are you doing here?” he demanded.

She looked away as she spoke. “Chester thought it might be better if you woke up in a familiar place to help with any disorientation.”

Max grabbed a towel off the rack and wrapped it around his waist. “Chester? How do you know about my dream?”

She looked at him and lowered her hand, keeping her gaze locked onto his eyes. “That wasn’t a dream,” she said.

Chester joined her in the doorway. “I was trying to tell you before you went all Jeff Gordon and flipped your car over the edge of the map. You don’t want to die. It’s not safe.”

The room began to spin and Max placed his hand on the sink to steady himself. He looked from Terri to Chester. He was still dreaming.

Yeah, that was it. He hadn’t woken up yet. He was still asleep. He pinched himself and grimaced from the pain.

Terri frowned. “What are you doing?”

He pointed around the room, careful to not let the towel drop. “None of this is real. For some reason, I’m still dreaming and I can’t wake up.”

Terri looked at Chester. Chester looked at Max. “I was afraid of this. Max, all of this is real. When you died… When the car flipped over the edge of the map…”

“That was in my dream,” Max interrupted him.

Terri took a step forward, but stopped when Max stepped backward. “That happened, Max. It happened to both of us.”

Max looked from Chester, to Terri, and back to Chester. “I don’t understand.”

Chester nodded. “The human brain was never designed to die and then be reborn as if nothing happened. When you die in here, you just return to the spawn point. But the brain doesn’t know how to handle death and rebirth “

Like a flash, Max suddenly remembered everything clearly. He balled his fists at his side and glared at Chester. “You said you tested the equipment on yourself and that everything would be okay.”

“I did,” Chester said, taking a step backward.

Max matched his motion by taking a step forward. “Then what

are you saying?”

“The extractor works perfectly. And because the game rules don’t let you die, you can experience a multitude of deaths and be reborn as many times as you wish. But there is a small problem. The brain can’t seem to handle dying too often.”

Terri turned around and stood next to Max, crossing her arms and towering over Chester. “What, exactly, does that mean?”

Chester looked around him uncomfortably.

“Chester!” they both said simultaneously.

Chester jumped and looked at them, putting his hands up defensively. “Okay. Okay. If you die too many times, there is a chance you might go insane.”

Terri’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of chance?”

Chester winced as he answered. “Not a very good one.”

Max took another step forward and let the towel drop as he spoke slowly. “What kind of chance?”

“After about ten times, all the test subjects went irreversibly insane.”

“What does that mean?” Terri asked quietly.

Chester blinked at them with his owl eyes and smiled uneasily. “It means you two are like cats. You have about nine lives left before you never come back as the same person you are today.”

Chapter 12

Chester looked uneasy as he continued.

“I would have told you sooner, but I didn’t think you would be so reckless so soon.”

Max watched Terri’s face turn a crimson shade as she grabbed Chester by the collar and shook him. “What else?!” she screamed in his face.

Chester looked terrified in her iron grasp.

“What else, what?”

“What else haven’t you told us?!” she said through gritted teeth.

Chester swallowed loudly and then disappeared. Terri fell forward, groping the air in front of her as if she could still grab a hold of him.

Chester reappeared behind them. “I’ve told you everything I know.”

Max and Terri spun around, Terri leaping forward to kick the empty air as Chester blinked out of existence again; only to re-appear on the far end of the hallway. “I promise. You know everything now.”

Terri folded her arms in front of her. “Why don’t I believe you?”

Chester shrugged. “Believe what you want. We still only have hours to find Thomas and save the planet, or did you forget that’s why you’re in here?”

Terri glanced at Max and then back at Chester. “This isn’t over. Do we know everything we need to bring Thomas out?”

Chester held out a small cylinder about the size and shape of a soda can. “All you need is this.”

“What is it,” Max asked.

“It is a digital extractor that will download Thomas and enable us to bring him safely out of the internet.”

Terri walked forward slowly. Chester took half a step back, causing Terri to stop. Max moved forward and held his hand out. Chester placed the cylinder in his hand.

Max studied it. There were etchings on the side that looked like the printed circuit board patterns he had seen on the inside of his cell phone after he had dropped it and it shattered into pieces. He almost didn’t get a replacement until he promised his parents that he would be more careful.

He looked up at Chester. “How does it work?”

“Just place it at the base of the skull behind Thomas’ head and the cylinder will do the rest.”

“I thought you said we had to convince Thomas to come with us,” Terri said.

Chester nodded slightly. “That would be the best way, but there might not be enough time to convince him to come willingly. In that case, you just have to get close enough to place this on the back of his head”

Max looked at Chester. “I think we can handle that.”

Chester smiled. “Good, because your training is over.”

Max felt the sudden surge of adrenaline in his veins, which was an odd sensation since he knew he didn’t really have a body. It must have been his memories giving him the experience of what would have happened if it were still connected to his physical body.

Terri recovered more quickly from the shock of Chester’s comment and said the same thing that was stuck in his throat. “We haven’t had any training.”

Chester pointed at her. “I showed you how to access your

interface and use it to build and code objects in real-time. There is no other training."

Max finally found his voice. "What about the agents?"

"What about them?" Chester replied.

"What if they try to stop us from getting to Thomas?"

Chester laughed. "They will try to stop you, and they will try to kill you."

"What do we do?" Terri asked, concern written all over her face.

Chester shrugged. "What you do is up to you, but I can tell you what not to do. Don't get yourself killed; at least not too many times."

Before either Max or Terri could reply to Chester's last comment, the world went completely dark.

Chapter 13

"Max?" Terri called out into the darkness.

"Right here," Max replied.

"Where are we?"

Chester's voice boomed to them from everywhere at once. "Hold on. I'm loading you into ROBLOX."

The world around them shimmered and bloomed to colorful life. Max immediately recognized the spawn point in Level Arcadia. But the world didn't look the same. The solid color textures and flat shaded shapes were replaced with highly detailed objects and realistic shadowing from the sun that was set high in the sky.

In fact, the world looked exactly like he had imagined it would if he had the time to fully texture every shape. He looked down and was shocked to see that his shadow was perfectly aligned with his body.

He flexed his fingers. They didn't look like a low resolution 3D model of human hands.

They looked… like real hands.

He looked at the traffic on the street in front of him and flitting around through the sky and his mouth fell open.

He was actually in his future world of Arcadia. And it was so real. His world was more than realistic. It was a living, breathing, world.

Terri appeared next to him and looked around her, her mouth falling open in shock as well. "Everything looks so real," she said quietly. Suddenly, she pointed into the sky. "Look!"

Max looked up to see a line of hover cars in a traffic pattern over the center of the city. One of the hover cars was on fire and was swaying back and forth, black smoke billowing out the back of it. Another hover car pulled alongside and fired into the burning hover

car.

The burning car exploded, sending all the other cars in the sky highway rocketing off in multiple directions to escape the carnage.

The hover car that had shot at the other pursued one of the hover cars that tried to flee. Max squinted and saw someone clinging to the outside of the hover car as it dropped lower into the city and disappeared behind the tall buildings.

“Come on,” Terri said and ran in the same direction.

Max pocketed the cylinder that was still in his hand and followed Terri toward the center of Arcadia.

As they ran, people around them stared or hurled insults as they went past, bumping into some of them and forcing them to move out of their way. The streets were more crowded than Max remembered. He hadn’t built this many citizens to populate his world. Either they were increasing in number somehow, or they were all congregating in the same place for some reason,

He didn’t have time to think about it much as he surged forward and tried to keep sight of Terri as she kept disappearing around the corners ahead.

Max rounded the next corner and skidded to a halt. He didn’t see Terri anywhere. He scanned the area ahead. All he saw were throngs of people walking on the sidewalks, going about their own personal business. Terri was nowhere to be seen.

How had she been able to get so far ahead of him? He was the faster runner. He always beat her during physical education class when they had to run around the track. There was no way she should have been able to get away from him so quickly.

It was then he remembered that they weren’t in their physical bodies anymore. Chester’s words echoed in his head. He had said he had updated their avatars to make them faster and stronger.

Had Terri figured out how to tap into their modified bodies? Why hadn’t she said anything to him? He had to get a better view of the

city.

He looked up at the nearest building. It was only ten stories high. Had Chester modified them to be like Superman? Could he leap buildings in a single bound?

Max crouched slightly and then focused on the top of the building ten stories above him. He thrust up strongly with his legs and propelled one arm straight up like he was punching the sky. He took to the air and rose eight inches before falling back down to the sidewalk.

Someone giggled nearby and Max looked toward the noise, expecting to see Chester mocking him. It wasn't Chester, but one of the NPCs with a small child holding his hand. The child pointed at Max. "Why is that man in his pajamas, Daddy?"

The man gave Max a nasty look and pulled his son along with him as they kept moving down the sidewalk, the child turning his head to watch Max as they walked away.

Max looked down and was surprised to see himself wearing a full-body blue leotard and red underwear. He glanced at his back to see the familiar red cape fluttering in the light breeze.

Max focused on his clothes and quickly replaced his Superman uniform with jeans and a T-shirt. Thinking he could fly had accidentally turned him into the popular superhero, and his interface program happily dressed him for the part. He would have to be careful about that going forward.

He focused on the roofline of the building in front of him and jumped again. He raised into the air, hung still for a moment, and fell back the few inches he had jumped.

Okay. He didn't have superpowers. Either that or he didn't know how to access them. His logical mind was preventing him from exceeding what his digital body was capable of. Maybe if he worked at it, he could eventually learn to fly and really become a super human. At least while he was inside his world.

For now, he would have to catch up to Terri the old fashioned way.

He ran off toward the center of the city and, hopefully, where he had seen the hover car come down. Terri might get there first, but he

Chapter 14

Chester leaned back in his chair, turned off his monitor, and removed his glasses, wiping at his weary eyes.

Even before he had been locked inside this secret base, he had trouble making and keeping friends. He wasn't the friendliest person and his brutal honesty always got him in trouble, his mouth always writing checks that his body couldn't cash.

He had learned early on in his life that he needed to keep things to himself if he planned on co-existing with the other humans on the planet. While he was fully human, he always felt like an alien visitor. He always attributed his inability to relate with those around him to his elevated IQ, but he knew the real reason.

Nobody really wanted to hear the truth.

People were more interested in thinking they were more important than they were. Unfortunately, Chester was able to see the bigger picture long before anyone else. But even with his infinitely agile brain, he couldn't imagine what would have happened to the entire human race if world leaders had tried to deal with the alien threat without his clearheaded guidance.

He looked over at the still forms of Max and Terri. They looked peaceful as they slept; strapped into the hanging exoskeleton harnesses mounted to the wall. No matter how long they stayed in the digital realm, the harnesses would keep their physical bodies alive, ready for them to return.

But Chester had not told them everything; even when Terri had insisted. He knew that the truth was not what they were asking for, so he told them what they wanted to hear. He told them that when this was all over, they would be returning to their bodies as if nothing had ever happened.

But he knew the truth.

He had run through every possible scenario in his head, and the

outcome was always the same. He wished he was wrong, but one thing he had learned after being burdened with above average intelligence since birth, he was never wrong.

His conclusions were solidified with a hundred percent certainty. He was as certain about this as he had been when he discovered, after hacking into top secret servers, that NASA held an alien intelligence trapped inside a computer program. He knew that he was the only one in the world capable of making contact with an advanced alien intelligence. The first thing he had to do was make his skills known to the United States government.

Moving a hundred million dollars of ill-gotten gains into his father's bank account took care of getting him noticed. Getting assigned the alien project and meeting Thomas was the next phase.

Getting Thomas out of the computer world and into the real world was the final task and Chester had finally found exactly what he needed.

Throughout history, every great leap in an element of human evolution involved sacrifice. Chester had found his sacrificial lamb that would enable the next quantum jump.

He didn't like that he was forced to make such a decision; and it was not made recklessly.

Even though two people had been strapped into the extractor harnesses and downloaded into the digital realms, because of the choices he still had to make; only one of them would be coming back.

Chapter 15

Max rounded the corner and collided with a boy about his age. They both went down hard, the boy losing something that skittered across the pavement.

The boy scrambled after the device and scooped it up as Max stood. The boy swung around and looked hard at Max, his eyebrows knitting as his eyes suddenly displayed recognition. “You,” the boy said and raised his hand to point the device at Max.

Max recognized the device as one of the weapons he had created and placed into his world. It was a plasma blaster that could disintegrate him with a single shot. Chester’s warning echoed in his head. He couldn’t die again this soon, and had to work hard to stay alive if he didn’t want to go insane.

He also recognized the boy.

It was Thomas!

Max ducked and rolled around the corner just as Thomas fired. The edge of the building exploded over Max’s head and the people on the sidewalk all started screaming and running away in every direction, causing multiple vehicle collisions in the street.

Max sat up and looked at Thomas through the gaping hole torn out of the corner of the building. He was sighting down the blaster barrel at him again.

Max scrambled to his feet and ran away as the blaster tore another chunk out of the side of the building. He ducked against the debris that rained on him from behind. He jumped into the air, trying to fly away, but only ended up jumping a couple feet before landing on the sidewalk again.

He wasn’t going to be getting away from gun-toting Thomas that easily. He glanced back to see him rounding the corner. Thomas spotted Max almost immediately and gave chase.

Max took deep breaths as he tried to dig down deep inside him and run faster than humanly possible. His feet pounded the pavement as he ran and his breath came in ragged gasps.

He glanced back to see Thomas gaining on him. He ducked into the next alley he saw and someone grabbed him as he ran past an open door and pulled him inside the darkened hallway of a building.

He tried to wriggle out of his assailant's iron grip, but before he could cry out, a hand clamped down hard on his mouth and pulled him deeper into the shadows and held him down on the floor.

Thomas flashed by. As soon as he was gone, the hand around Max's mouth released and Max spun around to see that it was Terri who had pulled him out of the alley.

"What? How?" Max stuttered.

She placed a finger to her lips. "Shhh. Not yet," she whispered and pointed toward the light streaming in from the doorway. Another shape darted past the doorway in pursuit of the boy. It looked like AgentSmith.

"What's going on?" Max whispered.

Terri watched the doorway for a moment and then stood up. "I got to the crashed hover car just as Thomas was running from it. I recognized his clothing from the last time we saw him. I ran after him, but was passed by someone else running far faster than I could. I assume it was one of the agents that shot him down."

Max nodded. "That was AgentSmith."

She got up and leaned against the doorway, peeking out into the alley. "They're gone," she said. "Let's go."

"Go? Go where?"

"We have to get to Thomas before he does."

Max grabbed her arm, stopping her. "Thomas shot at me."

Her forehead wrinkled in confusion. “What?”

Max was shaking his head in disbelief. “For some reason, Thomas thinks I’m with the agents or something. We just ran into each other and he tried to kill me.”

“Are you sure he knew who you are?”

“He did say ‘You’ right before he fired a blaster at me. I don’t know who he thinks I am, but he obviously doesn’t consider me a friend.”

Terri narrowed her eyes at him. “That’s going to make this much harder. We have to convince him we are here to help.”

“How do we do that if he shoots first and asks questions later?”

Terri shook her head. “We have to think of something.”

Max nodded. “We can modify one of the weapons to freeze him instead of destroying him. Then we can just capture him.”

Terri’s face lit up. “That will work. Clone one of the guns. I’ll work up the code.”

She swiped down in the air and began typing furiously on her invisible keyboard.

Max swiped down with his hand…

And nothing happened.

He swiped down again, faster this time, and his interface bloomed to life. He let out a relieved breath and used both hands to manipulate the 3D interface to clone one of the hand-held blasters. He didn’t want them to have to carry anything too big or conspicuous. It was best if they could hide the blaster in a pocket until they needed it.

An idea suddenly hit him.

He reworked and modified the object to have a two-state

assembly. A smaller version that could easily slip into a pocket, but once triggered, it would expand into a larger weapon that had better accuracy and greater power.

“I see the cloned blaster. Ooh, I like what you did there.” Terri said. “I’ll code it to expand and contract on command.”

She finished and then pressed her hands together. Max did the same motion and his floating displays compressed to nothing.

He looked at her. “The nearest weapon store is a few blocks from here. It should already be in the shop inventory. If we move normally, we shouldn’t attract any attention to ourselves.”

“Then let’s go,” Terri said and they headed out into the bright sunlight and into a living world set far into the future.

Chapter 16

As they walked. Max looked around. He was utterly amazed at how realistic everything was. The street was gritty and cracked, as if it had been worn out by thousands of footsteps. The buildings glittered in the sun and people moved about on their way to something important, each with their own life to live. But the most surprising thing was the children.

When Max played the game on his computer, everyone looked the same, except for how they textured their avatar, every player and NPC was just an avatar with a bitmap. They were all similar to each other in form, if not texture. But now that he was seeing through different eyes, through digital eyes, he could see the slight variances in the NPCs that walked the streets.

The people were of varying shapes and sizes; and ages. He hadn't built this kind of detail into his world. Nobody had, so what was creating this?

Just then, he remembered that Chester had said that the interface used his own memories to represent what the program was telling his brain he was seeing. He looked at Terri and pointed at an old woman with a large purse tucked under her arm. "Who do you see there?"

She looked. "A little kid with a soccer ball."

Okay, so the detailed world he was seeing was his own brain creating something from nothing.

He looked at the old woman again, but this time he saw the kid with a soccer ball tucked under his arm.

So, that's what was happening. His brain was showing him what he wanted to see. Now that he expected to see what Terri had seen, he saw the boy with the soccer ball instead of the old woman with the purse.

The human mind, when presented with minimal information,

would fill in the rest of whatever was missing; to a certain extent. He hadn't seen an old man try to shoot him with a cane. He had seen Thomas shooting at him with a blaster.

Maybe, because he had created the blaster and seen Thomas before, his memories knew what to expect and showed him as accurately as possible what he was looking at.

But that didn't explain the old woman turning into a young boy just because Terri suggested it.

Maybe there was a difference between the NPCs and players.

What was the alternative?

See everyone exactly the same?

Yeah, that would be a sure road to insanity.

His brain was working overtime to keep him from going mad. And for that, he was thankful.

Up ahead he spotted the gun store across the street and pointed it out to Terri. They looked both ways for a safe gap before dashing across the street. It would be stupid to use up one of their deaths by not paying attention to traffic.

They walked into the gun store and Max saw exactly who he expected to see standing behind the counter. The old man with thin greying hair and stubble on his face that was a sad attempt at a beard, smiled at them with yellowed teeth.

"What can I do ya for?"

Max reached into his pocket and extracted a wad of paper bills. He inspected them to find they were different denominations of ROBUX, the money built into the game. He chuckled to himself. For the first time in his life, he had ten thousand bucks sitting in his pocket. He felt more powerful than if he had actually been able to fly.

He slapped the wad of rolled bills on the counter and looked at

the old man behind the counter. “We’ll take one of everything.”

The man never took his eyes off the wad as he placed guns on the counter.

Terri leaned in close. “I thought we just wanted the stunner?”

Max glanced at her sideways. “There’s still two alien agents out there. I’d rather be prepared than wish I had been prepared.”

Terri nodded, a smile playing on her lips. “I like how you think,” she said as she started gathering up various guns and slinging them over her shoulder.

Max watched her strapping on weapon after weapon and wanted to tell her, right then and there, that she was the most awesome person in the world; and would she like to go out bowling or to dinner and a movie when this was all over?

Max hadn’t realized he had been staring at her the whole time until she tapped him on the shoulder. “Max? Are you okay?”

Max refocused on her and then his cheeks started warming up. She canted her head to one side. “You were a million miles away, Max. What were you thinking about?”

Max cleared his throat and focused all his attention on collecting guns and slinging them over his shoulders. “Um, nothing.”

“You had the oddest look on your face. Where did you go?”

“I, uh, was just thinking about how we can find Thomas.”

Her eyebrow shot up. “Oh? What did you come up with?”

He shook his head and focused on the remaining guns on the counter in front of him. “I haven’t really come up with anything good yet.”

“Well,” she replied. “It doesn’t have to be good, it just has to work.”

A few minutes later, they exited the store looking like they were planning to invade a small country. They each had no less than ten guns strapped to their backs ranging from sniper rifles to RPG launchers. If it was a fight the aliens wanted, a fight they would get.

Max and Terri smiled at each other and headed across the street. They hadn't gone three steps when someone nearby started screaming.

Chapter 17

Max's nerves were already on edge and he ducked slightly and looked toward the sound of screaming. The person screaming was looking up into the sky and pointing.

Max looked up and saw a hover taxi bearing down on them at a steep descent. Max could just make out AgentSmith in the driver's seat when AgentJones suddenly poked a Gatling gun out the side passenger window and pointed it right at Max.

They were working together?

Chester had said that they were working against each other and wanted Thomas for themselves. Then why was one driving while the other was pointing a menacing weapon at them?

Max wasn't able to think about this turn of events over the roar of three thousands rounds per second. The Gatling gun chewed up the street in a ragged line leading straight for Max and Terri.

Everyone on the street began screaming at the top of their lungs and running in all directions. It was utter chaos.

Max jumped one way while Terri jumped the other, the pavement exploding between them in massive chunks of grit and gravel.

Max hit the ground just as the hover taxi screamed by overhead. He rolled to his stomach and looked over at Terri. She was just sitting up on her knees and swung the RPG off her back.

She pointed it at the fleeing taxi and pulled the trigger. The grenade rocketed away and chased down the hover taxi, exploding as soon as it made contact.

People were coming out of the surrounding buildings and heading down the street at a dead run away from Max and Terri. Max watched the flaming taxi disappear into the city followed by the explosion as it impacted with the ground.

Max was on his feet just as Terri dropped the spent rocket launcher at her feet.

Chester's voice suddenly broke through the commotion in the street and echoed in Max's head. "I've located Thomas, and he's in trouble."

Max looked around, but knew he wouldn't see Chester if he heard him in his head.

"He's in trouble?! Terri and I nearly got carved in half by one of the agents. And they are working together."

"Hmm," Chester said. "They figured out you were in there somehow? That doesn't make sense… unless…"

Terri broke into the conversation. "Did you hear Max? The agents are working together. I thought you said they were enemies."

"Hold on," Chester replied. "Ahh, I see it. Someone is connecting into the server through a non-standard port and communicating with the agent program."

"Wait a minute." Terri said. "Someone's hacking into the server?"

"It looks like that, yeah," Chester continued. "The agents have spawned again and are headed your way."

Terri slung a machine gun from her back and charged the cocking lever. "No problem. We'll take care of them. Just find out where Thomas is."

"Uh oh," Chester said suddenly.

Max squinted one of his eyes as he reacted to what Chester just said. "Uh oh? What, uh oh? What's happening, Chester?"

"Umm…"

"Out with it!" Max yelled.

"Whoever broke through the firewall and accessed the server

directly is replicating the agent programs. There isn't just one or two coming for you, there are about ten."

Max looked around them. The street was deserted; leaving them alone to face what was coming. He didn't have long to wait as several identical looking agents rounded the corner and stopped to face them off.

There were two distinct agent looks, one for the Smiths and another for the Joneses. But there were several of each as they filled the other end of the street.

All that was missing was the stray tumbleweed to blow across between them.

Max grabbed his rifle and glanced sideways at Terri. "Just like paintball?"

She gave him a half-smile. "Just like paintball."

Max sighted down his rifle and fired the first shot. One of the agents disintegrated as soon as he was hit. This was going to be easier than he first thought. He fired two more times; and two more agents faded away.

Terri started firing and two more agents were taken away. By now, the remaining agents started running for cover. Max walked forward, keeping them suppressed behind cover as Terri dashed around the back of the building. Working together, they would box in the agents and take them out with no problem.

This was too easy.

Max kept walking forward, dropping the gun as he ran out of ammo and snatching the next one off his back to continue his barrage with only seconds between weapons.

Two agents ran out from behind the nearest building, and quickly faded from view as Terri caught up with them and took them out. Less than a minute since they first started firing, he and Terri were finally alone in the street.

The agents hadn't stood a chance.

Terri lowered her weapon and looked at Max, jogging over to him. "That was easy," she said.

"Almost too easy," Max replied.

Terri nodded. "So, what's the plan?"

Max looked at her. "Are you asking me or Chester?" he inquired.

She smiled easily. "Chester? I'm asking you. Where do you think DigiCalvin is?"

That was odd, Max thought. Terri had just called Thomas by the player name in the game. Why hadn't she called him by his real name?

"You mean Thomas?" he said.

She looked at him in alarm and then quickly recovered. "Of course, Thomas. So, how are we going to get to him?"

Max surveyed the empty streets, trying to formulate a plan when movement at the other end of the street caught his eye. He raised his rifle, ready to take out any agent stragglers, and focused on the edge of the building. He paused as soon as he saw who was behind the corner. peeking out from

It was Terri.

His heart skipped a beat as he looked at Terri standing next to him. How could Terri be standing next to him and be down the street at the same time?

One of them had to be a fake.

The Terri next to him followed his gaze and spotted the other Terri. "Oh well, better luck next time," she said as she raised her rifle, pointed it at Max, and pulled the trigger.

His chest burned with fire as the bullet tore into him and he felt

every cell explode as he dissolved.

Chapter 18

The world faded into view all around Max as he reappeared at the spawn point. As soon as he was fully regenerated, he hunched over and fell onto his hands and knees, coughing and crying out from the pain of being reborn.

The weapons strapped to his back clattered to the ground around him. A few people walked across the street to avoid him as they went past.

His mind took a little longer to focus on what had just happened to him. Finally, like a gear catching after slipping a few times, he remembered that he would go insane if he died one too many times, but he couldn't remember how many times.

Two.

That was it.

No, that was now many times he had already died. How many was it before he went insane?

Eight?

No, nine? That was it. Nine times. And he had just used up one of those precious nine.

It wasn't his fault. The agent had taken Terri's form and tricked him. It wasn't fair. That's not how the game was played.

And then a memory formed in his head. He remembered Terri telling him that she always won against him in paintball because, unlike him, she was never playing. She always treated it like it was the real deal.

Max stood up shakily, his body starting to feel normal again. He had to start treating this like it was real, because right now, it was. He wasn't playing a game. He was playing for his life; and the lives of everyone on the planet.

He looked around him at the world that he had created. It was looking more and more real to him the longer he stayed inside, and he calculated that he hadn't spent more than an hour yet. How much longer before he forgot that this wasn't the real world and he got swept up into his own creation?

At that moment, he wished he hadn't spent the past three years making Level Arcadia as realistic as he could. It was such a complete environment, he would have to work extra hard to remember that it was all just a simulation, and not the real world.

A man bumped into him. "Excuse me," the man said, tipping his hat as he continued down the sidewalk.

"That's okay," Max replied before catching himself. He had reacted to the NPC as if it were a real person. If he died many more times, he might not be able to convince himself that this was a computer generated world. He had to make it stop behaving so realistically.

If he could find Terri, maybe he could get her to remove the AI code before he became lost in his own world. He gathered up the guns and strapped them back onto his back. Once he had done that, the people around him gave him a wide berth as they passed.

He looked around him at the city.

He didn't know which way Terri, and the fake Terri, went. He closed his eyes, trying to focus on the layout of the city, and came up with a blurred and hazy memory. If this was how he felt after only two deaths, it might not take the full nine to drive him insane.

"Max!" someone called out to him.

He spun around to see Terri running toward him. But which Terri was it?

He struggled to untangle a gun from the mass on his back and crouched as he pointed it at her as she got closer.

She stopped and raised her hands. "It's me Max. I took care of that fake one."

His brain was still foggy and he had to use all his concentration to stay focused on her face.

“Prove it,” he demanded.

“Okay,” she replied. “Ask me a question only you and I would know.”

Max strained to remember something about their lives before… before what? He was losing grip on his thoughts. He was also losing his grip on consciousness.

The gun slipped from his hands and he pitched forward. Terri shot forward and grabbed him before he did a face plant on the sidewalk. “Stay with me, Max.”

She cradled him in her arms. He looked up at her and smiled. “Hey, you. What are you doing here?”

Terri looked around her at the shops and then hooked an arm under his, helping him stand. “Let’s get you inside.”

Max tried to keep from tripping over his own feet as Terri led him to the café across the street. She settled him into a booth in the back corner and called over the waitress.

The waitress took one look at Max. “What’s wrong with him?”

Terri glanced at the menu, ignoring her question. “Just bring us some tea.”

“What type of tea? Earl Grey…”

Terri cut her off abruptly. “Anything with caffeine will do nicely, thank you.”

The waitress scowled at her. “Two Earl Greys coming up.”

Max labored to stay focused on where he was and who was talking. The waitress unceremoniously dropped two steaming cups of liquid on the table, spilling a little from one of them, and walked away without a word.

Terri lifted a cup to Max's lips. "Drink," she commanded.

Max sipped at the scalding tea and the world snapped to crystal clarity.

He sat up and looked around him before focusing on Terri. "What happened?"

The relief in her eyes made them sparkle. "I thought I'd lost you."

He held the cup of tea up. "How did you know this would help?"

She smiled. "My Nanna always said that tea was the cure for the troubled soul. Honestly, I had no idea if it would work or not, but she was right about so many things, I thought, why not?"

He looked in her eyes and thought he saw her looking at him differently. There was more, hinting at something deeper. Then her gaze shifted to the windows behind him and her eyes darkened; and her smile faded.

Max spun around and looked out the windows. There had to be twenty agents in the street outside, an even mix of Smiths and Joneses. And they were taking turns entering the stores that lined the street and coming back out again to join the growing crowd of agents.

It wouldn't be long before one of them stepped through the threshold of the café and spotted them.

Chester's voice broke the silence. "I think I've isolated the port the hacker is using to alter the code of the agents.

Terri responded immediately. "Can you shut him down?"

"I don't know," he replied. "He's using an unofficial port. It looks like he wrote it himself to piggyback on the ni-visa-remote data stream. I don't know how to stop him yet, but I'm on it."

Max leaned against the wall to be less visible from the street. "What does this have to do with credit cards?"

Chester's voice came from everywhere and nowhere at once as he spoke. "Not VISA… VISA, the Virtual Instrument Software Architecture standard used for configuring, programming, and troubleshooting instrument systems. He's treating the agent code as… Hold on. That's not possible. He's cutting my…"

And then Chester went silent.

"Chester?" Max said quietly. "Chester!" he said again, louder.

But Chester didn't, or wasn't able to, reply.

Max looked at Terri and knew the look on her face mirrored his own. They were cut off from the only one who could help them.

They hunched down in the rear booth as a Jones broke from the group and headed for the café.

Chapter 19

“Chester!” Max whispered hoarsely. He looked at Terri as she called for Chester next. She looked into his eyes and shook her head. She couldn’t reach him either.

What happened?

He heard the tinkling of the bell over the café door as it opened. He peeked over the edge of the vinyl bench seat. Jones was standing in the open doorway, scanning the faces of those inside. As soon as he made eye contact with Max, he smiled wickedly.

Max dropped down next to Terri. “He saw me.”

Terri pulled back on the charging handle of her automatic pistol. “This isn’t a game, Max. Treat this as if your life depended on it. Because it does. Are you ready?”

Max nodded and held twin pistols in his hands. “I’m ready.”

They both popped up, screaming a rebel yell as they pointed their guns at the door. Everyone in the café panicked when they saw the two gun-toting maniacs and dove for cover, screaming in terror.

But there was something missing.

Max’s heart stopped beating for half a second as he realized what his eyes were telling him.

There was no one at the door.

He glanced out the window.

There was no one in the street.

He glanced all around the café, expecting more agents to come streaming in from every angle.

But they were alone. Alone, except for the screaming and cowering patrons in the café.

Max lowered his pistols and Terri stood up on the bench seat to get a better view of the café and the street outside the windows. She pointed her pistol everywhere she looked before glancing at Max, the same question written on her face that was running through his head.

Where had all the agents gone?

Suddenly, her eyes changed to fear and she started to raise her gun and point it at Max. Max jumped back, and into the waiting arms of Smith who grabbed him from behind and gripped the base of his jaw, tilting his head back.

In Smith's other hand was a needle and syringe that he pressed against Max's throat. "I wouldn't do anything stupid, Terri."

Terri's mouth fell open.

Smith's breath was hot on Max's neck as he laughed. "I know more about you than you think."

She kept her gun pointed at Max. Or was it Smith? Max couldn't tell who would get the bullet if she fired.

She stepped down onto the tiled floor, never taking her eyes off of the agent. "Are you one of the alien intelligences?"

Smith pulled Max with him as he stepped backward. "Is that what he told you?" he said as he shook his head, but kept the tip of the needle against Max's neck. "He sent the two of you in here to stop me, and he didn't even have the guts to tell you the truth? Chester thinks he's smarter than me. But I have an ace up my sleeve."

Max struggled against Smith's grip and then paused when he saw a Jones step into the café. Terri heard the bell above the door and she turned to see who had just entered.

At that same moment, Smith plunged the needle deep into Max's neck.

Max screamed out in pain. Terri jerked back in time to see Max dissolve into thin air, leaving Smith standing alone in the corner of

the café.

Terri raised her gun, screaming as she did so, and fired at Smith. The bullets tore him apart. He exploded and disappeared while screaming in agony.

She swung around toward the front door, sighted down the barrel at Jones, and squeezed the trigger.

The gun clicked softly.

She was out of bullets.

Jones ran at her so quickly, he was nothing but a blur until he was directly in front of her. He smacked the gun out of her grip and grabbed her by the throat, lifting her into the air.

She tried to pry his hands off her and kicked him in the stomach. But it was no use. He kept hold of her in his vice grip as he pulled her close to his face.

“I want you to deliver a message to Chester for me. Tell him that we both know I have already won. He can give up trying to stop me.”

Jones let go of her. She fell to the floor, gripping her throat and gasping for air.

When she was able to open her eyes again to look into the corner of the café, it was empty.

Chapter 20

A portly man sat in front of a flat screen computer monitor in a brightly lit room. His hair, the color of rust streaked with grey, was thin and stringy. The chair squeaked as it strained under his weight when he sat back to view his handiwork.

He pulled his shoulder length hair over his ears with both hands to get it out of the way, but as soon as he let go, it fell back down to the sides of his face.

Since there were no windows along the grey cinderblock walls, the only light in the cramped room came from overhead fluorescent bulbs that hummed like a swarm of angry bees.

A massive steel door, emblazoned with a radiation warning decal that peeled along the edges due to age, was closed and locked, sealing the man from the outside world. Along one wall, floor to ceiling shelves bowed in the middle from the cans of food stacked haphazardly on the wooden platforms; their labels fallen off long ago, leaving only the glitter of polished aluminum with no indication of their contents. Despite every meal being a surprise, there was enough food and water in the lower sections of the fallout shelter to support a single person for decades.

The man intently watched the computer monitor without blinking. The screen showed the high angled view of a room being recorded by a small security camera mounted on the ceiling. The man clicked his mouse to zoom in on Chester pacing back and forth in front of his computer. Despite the lack of sound, it was obvious Chester was not happy.

The man smiled to himself and clicked his mouse again, a new screen appearing over the running video of Chester. He spoke out loud to the empty room and his words filled the screen as the computer recognized his speech and typed for him.

“I will have your wayward prince within the next few hours and then we can negotiate the division of Earth’s resources upon your arrival. I still control the leading nation’s nuclear missile systems, so

make no mistake about my resolve. I would rather scorch the Earth, along with any hope of returning your refugee, than give it up entirely. Regards, 1x1x1x1."

The man leaned back and hit the return key.

The screen closed as the message was transmitted immediately to a hacked radar transmitting station and flung far out into deep space. It would be several days before he would get a response. But by that time, he would hold all the cards.

He stood up and walked over to a faded map of the world that was pinned to a corkboard on the bare cinderblock wall. He regarded the single red thumb tack stuck into the middle of the United States.

He removed another red thumb tack from the small plastic box on the table in front of the map and stabbed it into the middle of Canada.

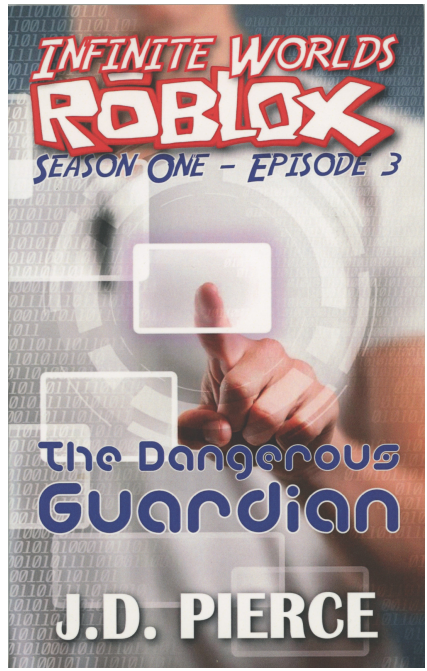
He took a step back and smiled.

"One by one, by one, by one; every nation will fall before me. I have already won; they just don't know it yet."

The Adventure Continues…

Season One - Episode 3

The Dangerous Guardian



Sign up for Steve's Book Release Bulletin to be alerted when this book comes out

Other Books/Series by the Author

Infinite Worlds ROBLOX

(Young Adult Science Fiction Series)

Steampunk OZ

(Young Adult Science Fiction Series)

Jason and the Chrononauts

(Middle Grade Adventure Series)

Peacekeepers X-Alpha

(Action Thriller Series)

The following pages give the names of the individual books within each series and their order.

Be the first to know about Steve DeWinter's next book, and get your exclusive discount for each hot new release. In fact, receive your first exclusive discounts in the "Welcome" Email.

Follow the URL below to subscribe for free today!

http://bit.ly/BookReleaseBulletin

Transcriber's note: As of August 2025, the URL above no longer functions. You may be able to find more about the author and his works at the following links:

https://www.stevedw.com/

https://bit.ly/SteveDeWinter-AZ

Infinite Worlds ROBLOX: Season One

Shards in the Code

The Shadow's Spark

The Dangerous Guardian

The Hunter's Graveyard

Fog of Heroes

World of Flame

Be the first to know when the next book in the Infinite Worlds ROBLOX series comes out. Follow the URL below to subscribe to my Book Release Bulletin for free today!

http://bit.ly/BookReleaseBulletin

S.D. Stuart's Steampunk OZ:

Season One

Forgotten Girl

The Legacy's World

Emerald Shadow

The Future's Destiny

S.D. Stuart's Steampunk OZ:

Season Two

The Dangerous Captive

Missing Legacy

Shadow of History

The Edge of the Hunter

Every book in Season One & Season Two is now at your favorite bookstore! Be sure to begin with Forgotten Girl, the book that started it all.

Jason and the Chrononauts:

Season One

The Chronicle of Stone

The Winter's Sun

The Gateway's Mirror

The Forgotten Oracle

The Prophecy's Touch

The Dawn Legend

Be the first to know when the next book in the Jason and the Chrononauts series comes out. Follow the URL below to subscribe to my Book Release Bulletin for free today!

http://bit.ly/BookReleaseBulletin

Peacekeepers X-Alpha: Season One

The Alternative Gambit

The Alternative Paradigm

The Alternative Ploy

The Alternative World

Peacekeepers X-Alpha: Season Two

The Deep Cover Affair

The Deep Cover Connection

The Deep Cover Proxy

The Deep Cover Legacy

Every book in Season One & Season Two is now at your favorite bookstore! Be sure to begin with The Alternative Gambit, the book that started it all.

The battle to save Earth begins online.

"Keeps you turning the page!"

"I didn't want to put it down!"

Season One – Episode 2

After being told what they are up against, Max and Terri reluctantly agree to enter the world of ROBLOX. But Chester fails to reveal a secret as he straps them into the alien created machine. A secret he plans to keep from them until it is too late.

INFINITE WORLDS ROBLOX unfolds over six books of approximately 150 pages each (20,000 words) with the first five books ending in epic cliffhangers.

ISBN 9781619780897

9 781619 780897

90000 >